

ALUMNI PROFILE: PATRICIA GRADY (NHS'67)

By Lauren Wolkoff

Like many young women of her generation, **Patricia Grady (NHS'67)** was drawn to nursing by her requisite love for science, a natural curiosity, and a fascination with the *Cherry Ames* book series.

This is how she arrived at Georgetown as an excited nursing undergraduate student in the early sixties—looking forward to a career she felt was versatile enough to accommodate various life stages and would enable her to make a difference in people's lives.



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Her career has since taken off in unforeseen and unimaginable directions. Grady is about to mark her 15th year as director of the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), one of the 27 institutes that comprises the National Institutes of Health.

As she looks forward to what lies ahead, she also pauses to reflect on how far she has come since her Georgetown experience, which she remembers as a time of transition.

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Coming to Washington, D.C., from a small town in southern Florida, Grady had never even considered graduate studies. Her fascination for neuroscience, too, had lain largely untapped. Further, the field of nursing research was a mystery to her.

As she engaged in life across the university—interacting

with students from all campuses—and took advantage of what the city had to offer, the pieces of the puzzle started to come together.

“The signs were there but had not been articulated,” said Grady. “I had a very curious mind, liked asking questions, and enjoyed solving mysteries. Georgetown nurtured that and shaped me.”

Energized and inspired by her undergraduate experience, Grady went on to earn her master's in nursing and her Ph.D. in physiology, both from the University of Maryland.

LEAVING AN IMPRINT

In her current role, Grady fulfills the mission she espoused so early on to make a difference to patients. Yet her highly visible position enables her to take this passion to a national stage by helping shape a policy agenda that places nursing research at the forefront of health care.

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For Grady, prevention, wellness, and symptom management are key areas in which nursing and nursing research can play an increasingly prominent role.

“The kind of science we have evolved to doing is so critical to the future of health and society,” said Grady. “We are working in areas of symptom management and quality of life, and are experimenting with new interventions for people to stay healthy for as long as possible in the face of chronic illness.”

The NINR is also heavily involved with addressing health disparities and cultural adaptation, issues Grady believes are critically important to the future of nursing and health sciences in general. Eliminating health disparities is among the institute’s top research priorities, along with health promotion and disease prevention, quality of life, and end-of-life care.

Last May, Grady convened a group of thought leaders to define next generation priorities.

NHS Dean **Bette Jacobs**, who participated, said, “Pat Grady represents the intellectual reach and grounded values of Georgetown stamped by her personal drive and insight.”

Beyond that, under Grady’s leadership the NINR is helping to influence an entire generation of nursing scientists and to shape a new era of scientific inquiry. The institute has established training programs to develop nurse investigators and introduced genetics as a key component of nursing research.

Among the multiple training initiatives is the Summer Genetics Institute, an intensive one-month research training program conducted at the National Institutes of Health.

“This program has been a marvelous way to populate the academic health centers around the country with nurse scientists who have a functional knowledge of genetics that they can incorporate into their research and practice, as well as teach the information to others,” Grady said.

FOSTERING A NEW GENERATION

Grady has seen many changes in her field during the course of her career, many of which have to do with the evolution of women’s role in health care.

“Women in all fields, including nursing, are in much stronger leadership roles—ranging from CEOs of hospitals to heads of companies to more traditional hospital-based leadership roles,” she said.

This shift will only help advance nursing, she said, as the tendency grows for women to pursue an advanced degree and to view nursing as a career, rather than a job.

In addition, Grady is keenly aware of the need to increase the diversity of the nursing and research workforce to take full advantage of the synergies, perspectives, and unique skill sets intrinsic in such diversity.

For example, only about 11 percent of nursing faculty is from minority backgrounds, and men comprise only about six percent of all registered nurses. While some progress has been made in this area, Grady believes much work remains to be done.

One piece of advice she offers all nurse scientists, including young investigators and those just starting their careers, is to avoid planning their careers too carefully and to remain open to opportunities that may not be obvious.

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